

Le Théâtre en Cours de Français : le corps et les émotions en jeu

Below you will find three exercises that use theatre skills to enhance your students' studies in French. These activities are tried and tested for students K-12.

To tailor the activities to your year level, some suggestions to develop the exercise are given. In general, more repetition for younger students and less repetition with more opportunities to improvise for older students is the key.

Theatre exercises work best in a large space where you can make noise in comfort. If you have access to a hall or different room in your school, you will find your students will be freer. However, they can all be practised in the classroom. Divide the class into smaller groups as space requires, involving the "audience" by asking for assistance in interpretation.

Activities

A. Warm Up

Form a circle. Say "Je vais dire mon nom et faire un geste."
Repeat this several times, each time making a different gesture.

Then say your name while doing your gesture and ask the class to repeat your name and movement.

Repeat a few times giving extra instructions such as:

"Maintenant parlez plus fort / tout le monde doit faire le geste / bougez vos corps plus"

Then take turns around the circle, repeating each person's name / gesture each time.

Point out the less obvious parts of someone's gesture.

Eg. "Ne manquez pas de bouger vos pieds comme John.",

"Vous avez vu que Rhianna a souri en faisant son geste? Il faut qu'on souri, nous aussi."

Tips:

Don't move on from each turn until everyone has at least moved their bodies in imitation. Decide on your minimum of participation and insist on this.

Don't miss anyone in the circle - wait for the shy ones and help them by suggesting small movements to make.

To develop further:

- Ask that each gesture involves the person's whole body
- Ask that the voices become louder, or softer, or whispered with a miniature gesture etc.
- Ask for an emotion / state, a gesture and words that match eg.
"Je suis très fatigué / fâché / triste / heureux".
- Ask for more complicated improvised statements such as "Je suis plombier / professeur / président", "On va (à la piscine, au zoo, en cours, au marché)", each time asking to see movement or action that demonstrates.

This activity will :

- allow students to get used to being in front of others
- wake up the body and mind ready for expressive movement and improvisation
- allow you to set up a way of assessing performance, by inviting comments, drawing attention to details and encouraging ad-libbing and self-expression.

B. Characterisation - Speaking as someone else

Ask the class to walk slowly around the room. No touching others allowed.
When you clap, they must freeze.

Now say "Maintenant on va changer nos démarches". Ask that when they freeze, they keep their body in a posture which shows how they were walking.

Follow this sequence to work up to character walks:

- Slow, fast, big, small, smooth, flowing, sharp, rigid, floppy.
- Happy, sad, angry, afraid, surprised, excited, tired.
- Shy, confident, powerful, powerless.
- You're very old, very late, very young, very busy, very bored, very amazed, very important, very hungry, very thirsty, very rich, very poor.
- More complicated characters for older students might include:
You're old and thirsty, important and late, a young child who's excited, a young child who's sad, a busy Mum, a bored Grandad, a tired important official, an excited school principal, a surprised sportsperson etc.
Use your imagination and sense of humour.

Return to standing in a circle. Now ask two people at a time to play. Using a given dialogue they must enter the circle in character, say the words (ad libbing if they choose) then return.

Example dialogue:

"Bonjour, madame" / "Bonjour, monsieur"

"J'ai perdu (ma montre, mes clés...). Vous l'avez vu?" / "Oui, la voici." or "Non, désolée."

"Au revoir." / "Au revoir."

Ask the class to decide what type of character each actor was playing.

Ask the actors, once the game is established, to improvise more. Help them by supplying words if necessary. If someone has an interesting character, ask them to repeat the scene a few times, adding more dialogue. Ask the other students to help write the lines.

Examples: "J'ai perdu ma montre. Vous l'avez volée! Je la vois sur vous!"

"Je n'ai pas vu votre montre, madame. Je suis aveugle. Quand même!"

To develop further:

- For primary students, use dialogues that encourage yes / no answers, or supply simple dialogue.
- Ask each person to say (then write) in one or two sentences what happened just before the character walked on "stage".
Eg. if the character walk was happy the child may produce: The girl is happy because she saw her friend. Or: The old man is surprised because he saw a ghost.

This activity will:

- Allow students more freedom in the words they choose to say in French - because they are speaking "as someone else".
- Invite students to feel ownership of the things they say.
- Encourage self-expression and get the students motivated to find the appropriate words, especially in amusing situations or situations where there is a conflict.
- Allow students to feel the need and desire to communicate.

C. Engaging the body and the emotions to create in French

Part One: Frozen tableau

Divide your group in half. One half is on stage as actors, the second half are in the audience.

Introduce the situation you will all depict by a frozen tableau.

One by one, put the actors on stage. They must use their body to show an action and their character, then freeze.

Example: At the market. A vegetable seller holds up his produce.

Once your actors are set up and the characters are clear, point at each actor in turn and ask them to move.

Follow this sequence to create a scene where each person speaks:

1. each actor must move, 2. make a sound while moving, 3. add at least one word that suits their action or character.

Once this is set up, look for a conflict in the scene. Eg. at the market, a seller accuses someone of stealing an apple.

Each character must now react to this event. Follow the same steps to create reactions:

1. a gesture or movement, 2. a sound (gasp, sob, shout), 3. words.

Now ask that each character take a side in the conflict.

Who is in the right? who wants to leave or get involved? Keep referring to the characters at play in order to find emotional motivations for their reactions.

Eg. a small child may be frightened therefore run away. An important businessman may be angry and step in. A busy Mum may be impatient and leave.

To develop further:

- After playing the scene several times, add actors to play a TV crew or the police who will interview the characters.
- Ask the class to write the scene from their characters viewpoint.
- Develop the moment of conflict so that there is real debate and argument as to what should happen. Ask the students to physically group themselves together according to their chosen "side" and have them work in groups to create speeches to convince the others.

Ideas for situations:

K-3 At the shops. A young child loses parent. Take the child to the centre or stay where you are?

3-6 A ball game. Someone throws a ball through a window. Alarm goes off. Go and get it or not?

7-12 On the street. A car crash. Go to help or back away? Whose fault was it?

This activity will:

- Give students an emotional motivation to speak and learn vocabulary
- Encourage spontaneity and fluency of expression
- Widen their range of expression by speaking as other people.

Checklist for your own activities:

Before commencing a drama activity with your students, check that you have these ingredients for an effective drama exercise:

- a plan to warm-up : body, voice, alertness.
- emotions in play
- the body and gestures in play
- imagination at play.

Notes for AIS workshops

To teach language - engage attention, engage the body, engage emotion, engage imagination.

K-6

Three ways to teach and memorise language items:

1. Tie it to movement through gesture, dynamics and rhythm
2. Give it a motor which engages imagination
3. Use repetition and performance pressure in a fun way.

Getting the voice out strongly, flexibility in vocal expression and sounds

7-12

Three ways to reinforce expression and language items:

1. Tie it to movement through gesture, dynamics and rhythm
2. Give it an emotional motivation or motor
3. Use repetition and performance pressure in a fun way.

Exercises:

Yes / No / What with levels of size, volume, emotion etc.

Simple drama exercise / improv. sport such as a What next... ? game.. any game that puts the language item into a situation.

What makes a good situation?

- drama ie. conflicting desires
- fun ie. a chance to invent and resolve
- a physical world

Find the communicative purpose of the language, whether it's a text or a rule.

The role of characters in language learning - using simple example text, ways to use "getting into character" as an approach to extend personal range and communication.